

Station 2: Los Tigres del Norte

Los Tigres del Norte and Christian Nodal are Norteño artists, which is Regional Mexican music. Los Tigres del Norte has been performing for over fifty years and have a large fanbase. Their songs are often corridos, a narrative ballad. Los Tigres tackle issues of the border and immigration in their songs, often centering the working class near the border. Read the below news article and respond to the following questions.



Immigration Blues: On the road with Los Tigres del Norte

By Alec Wilkinson, *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010

A few days before Christmas, the norteño band Los Tigres del Norte, four brothers and a cousin, were aboard their bus in San Antonio, Texas, on their way to Randy’s Ballroom, on the city’s west side, which is rough. The brothers are Jorge, Hernán, Eduardo, and Luis Hernández, and the cousin is Oscar Lara. Jorge, the oldest, is the leader. He is watchful and determined, and he dreams of a boardroom where the band for the Super Bowl is chosen by someone who says, “Why not Los Tigres again?” Hernán, who dresses tastefully, and has black hair, with a streak of gray, is gracious, genial, and thoughtful. Eduardo is soulful and reserved and the most gifted musician among them. Luis, who is the youngest, is the heartthrob, and Oscar has the slightly remote air of a man who often appears to be amused by his thoughts...

In the past few years, Los Tigres have spent several hundred thousand dollars on close-fitting suits made for them by the Nashville tailor Manuel, who is sometimes called the Rhinestone Rembrandt. At Randy’s, they wore green suits with silver rhinestones arranged in a leaflike pattern that descended from their shoulders like wings. An announcer began chanting, “Tigres! Tigres!” Jorge, who plans the band’s entrances, strode onstage, already singing into a microphone attached to his cheek, and the curtain fell. Three generations of families sometimes show up to see Los Tigres, and in the front row was a young man who carried a small boy on his shoulders. Behind them were rows of cowboy hats, like a skyline.

Los Tigres sing in Spanish—mainly about things that happen to poor people in Mexico, or to Mexicans in America. When I asked among the crowd what the songs were about, a woman replied, “This is about a man with a dog, and they tell him, ‘You better watch your dog, or it will get away,’ and it does get away. It’s about how the Mafia has taken over Mexico.” She was describing the band’s most recent song, “La Granja,” which means “The Farm,” a fable involving barnyard animals, which begins, “If the dog is tied up / even barking all day long / you should not untie her. / My grandfather said, ‘If they do, they will regret it / ’cause they don’t know.’ ” In six more verses, the song describes, metaphorically, the havoc caused by the drug lords with the connivance of the government.



Norteño is country music from the vicinity of the border. It features succinct and dramatic narratives told in an aloof, almost deadpan language, with high-pitched singing and clipped accordion figures. It is an older, less worldly relation to Tejano, or Tex-Mex. A norteño band includes the bajo sexto (Eduardo and Luis), the electric bass (Hernán), drums (Oscar), and, occasionally, the alto saxophone (also Eduardo), which plays in close harmony with the accordion (Jorge and sometimes Eduardo, too). So as not to distract from the stories, which are usually grave, and sometimes sentimental, the arrangements are compact and spare. The accordion customarily plays an introduction (usually scripted) and makes remarks among the verses, but there are no solos. To convey the import of the song, the singers enunciate as carefully as stage actors.

The trade magazine *Billboard* classifies norteño as Mexican regional music, a subcategory of Latin music. According to Leila Cobo, who covers Latin music for *Billboard*, “No other band is quite as influential or important as Los Tigres, or has had quite the impact, or is quite this well known.” Since 1972, they have sold thirty-four million records. In Mexico, fourteen movies, in which they appear, have been adapted from their songs. In 2002, more people saw them at the Houston Astrodome than had ever seen a concert there before: 67,002. (Fifty-five thousand people heard the Beatles at Shea Stadium in 1965.) In Mexico City, an audience of a hundred and twenty thousand is typical. John Reilly, Los Tigres’ press agent, at Rogers & Cowen, a firm that has also represented the Rolling Stones and Elton John, told me that most acts have to be taken through the kitchen when they return to their hotels, to avoid the fans in the lobby. Los Tigres have to go through the front door. “You take them through the kitchen, and you shut down the hotel,” he said. “There is no room service, no more maid service, and the housekeeping closes down.”

Los Tigres may be the only arena act in the world that doesn’t use a set list. Customarily when they take the stage, they have in mind three songs to play. Meanwhile, people write titles on scraps of paper that they hand through the crowd until the papers are thrown onto the stage. The band picks up the papers. The concert is over when the stage is clean.

Los Tigres call their performances dances, not concerts. The distinction embodies the traditions of norteño, which was originally made by people who worked all day, then played in the evening for the people they had worked beside, who would dance. How long they played depended upon how long the dancers wanted them to play... A few weeks ago, in Brooklyn, Los Tigres took the stage at around one in the morning and played until four; they would have played longer but the building, an armory, had a curfew. Eight thousand people, many of them dressed like cowboys, paid fifty dollars for a ticket. Balls of paper flew in arcs between the crowd and the musicians, and sometimes grazed them. Los Tigres wore black suits with red and green highlights in a sort of twining, peacock-feather pattern. A few hundred feet from the stage, shadowy figures could be seen rising and falling, like hobby horses—couples dancing.

The majority of Los Tigres’ songs are corridos, a species of compressed ballad characteristic of norteño. Corridos are a form of bulletin. Something of consequence, usually violent, happened somewhere, and the corrido is the medium for broadcasting it. (One could think of the *Iliad* as a long-form corrido.) Corridos began to appear in northern Mexico in the eighteen-sixties and have



a single reference, the border. They emerged to express the strife that ensued when a remote and unified territory was divided suddenly, following the Mexican War. No corrido has been written that is not somehow in the shadow of this circumstance. Antique corridos had bad men and cattle drives and border disputes as subjects, as did cowboy ballads—the explanation being that the culture of the region was an amalgamation of Mexican and Anglo elements. According to the corrido scholar Elijah Wald, this is why so many cowboy words, such as “lasso,” “rodeo,” “bronco,” “buckaroo,” “canyon,” and galón, which means braid, as in ten-gallon hat—a hat tall enough for ten braids—are Spanish.

The villains in many early corridos were the Texas Rangers, who were regarded as violent henchmen for land-grabbing ranchers. Often, the Rangers, called “rinches,” were described satirically. In an old-fashioned corrido, a Texas Ranger might kill the hero’s wife—or his children or parents or brothers and sisters—in a cowardly way. The hero kills the Ranger, Texas sends more Rangers, who are afraid of the hero, who kills them, too. Eventually, the hero is killed, often by Rangers who overwhelm him or trick him or creep up on him and shoot him in the back, or, as a matter of honor, he allows himself to be captured. Essentially, corridos describe a defeat, but a dignified one. Had the hero not been provoked, he would have lived peacefully. Because an indefatigable antipathy existed between the Mexicans and the Rangers, there were always new corridos.

During the early twentieth century, the corrido became a sympathetic home to war stories, and lots of corridos were written about Pancho Villa, the peasant bandit and hero general who raised an army of cowboys during the Mexican Revolution. A dominant theme in modern corridos is the anxieties and dangers of crossing the border illegally.

In addition, corridos are almost always factual, or at least claim to be. Their audience no more cares to hear about imaginary characters and imaginary happenings than the readers of the Wall Street Journal would care to read about made-up businessmen and made-up business deals. Corrido writers often collect material as if they were reporters. Paulino Vargas, who has written for Los Tigres, has said that when he hears about something that might provide a fit subject for a corrido he likes to visit the place where the event took place and talk to people who witnessed it.

For the majority of their songs, Los Tigres rely on four or five writers, a few of whom specialize in corridos. (The band also sings boleros—romantic songs—and cumbias, which are the equivalent of light verse.) People write letters to Los Tigres telling their stories. They shake hands with the band members as they pose with them and say, “The first time we came to the border, my wife was pregnant and they turned us away, because they said we were undesirable and a threat, so we paid a man my brother-in-law knew in Tijuana with a truck. . . .” When Jorge hears a story that he thinks will make a good corrido, he consults with one of the band’s writers. The writer works up a draft, and Jorge responds. “There’s a lot of editing,” he said. He likes a corrido to resemble a play, with characters whose mistakes or misfortunes seem real to the audience. Chris Strachwitz said there will always be norteño music, because there will always be people trying to cross the border...



Questions:

How do Los Tigres Del Norte intertwine vaquero culture in their artistry and stage presence?

How does the history behind Norteño music connect to the origins of the vaquero/cowboy?